



The Social Affordances of New Media and Communication Technologies: Encouraging Civic Engagement, Good Governance and Democratisation?

7 October 2010

Joint seminar hosted by *Glocal Nomad* and *International Media Support*

Roskilde University, CBIT (43.3.29)

9 am – 3.30 pm

Media are crucial to the exercise of freedom of expression. Public opinion can only be formed if a public that engages in rational discussion is able to create and occupy a communicative space that is, ideally, free and independent of established interests and as well as, open and accessible to all citizens. The ongoing emergence and convergence of the electronic mass media has changed notions of the public sphere radically.

In late modern, established democracies the plurality of media outlets have long provided the most significant public platform through which this civic right of freedom of expression has been exercised. In other societies, characterized by the absence and fragility of free and pluralistic media, the opposite potential of media often occurs; there is a more dominant tendency to reinforce the power of vested interests and exacerbate social inequalities by excluding critical or marginalized voices. Thus, the idea of media as a platform for democratic debate and political deliberation, as a vehicle for cultural expression and as a civic stage to promote transparency and public scrutiny is only poorly fulfilled. Under these conditions, independent journalism and other forms of mediated free expression, that can be seen as necessary while not sufficient means of strengthening good governance and promoting human development, might be silenced effectively.

Under these conditions, social forces opposing authoritarian regimes, from within and without, strive to create and occupy 'alternative' channels of mediated communication which may contribute to an emerging public sphere. That is, they struggle to create a citizen media space for public debate which seeks to work around structural constraints such as state censorship and -control, the coercive engineering of consent, the overt promotion of capitalist culture, and so on.

Media development/support – as practiced by various non-governmental and state- media industries, as well as multilateral donor-funded organizations – has long sought to nurture media frameworks and journalistic practices which are oriented towards the overarching normative ideal of a mass media constituted, free and open public sphere. Another strand of 'encouragement' has come with the (international) support of civil society organizations and

social movements advocacy-oriented strategies of mediated communication. We might argue that civil society organizations and social movements are the collective embodiment of the politically informed and engaged citizen. Support of their objectives implies a civic, bottom-up encouragement of the formation of an open and pluralistic public sphere. Their common focus on issues of accountability, transparency, good governance, democratization, etc. – which is a focus on the structural issues lying beyond questions of social service provision – makes them vital stakeholders in any healthy media environment, providing both support and scrutiny.

Ideally, CSOs and SMs will play a role in: monitoring media content and ownership; providing direct advocacy on freedom of expression, journalism safety and media policy and regulation; capacity building; and helping communities to access information and make their voices heard. They can engage with media professionals and policy makers to ensure that media meets the information needs of all sectors of society. Through their expertise and community base they can also inform reporting (on issues such as HIV-AIDS prevention) and ensure that the media avoids stereotyping or excluding the voices of marginalized groups. Ideally, the support and scrutiny that they give in relation to the media (as institutions) also goes the other way. Thus, the thematic focus of independent journalism should include informed journalistic investigations into the agency of CSOs and SMs.

New technologies increasingly play a central role in the mediation of social networks. Any socially grounded theory of the public sphere will have to take into account these social network structures and the communications systems that bind them together. Not just the structure of the mass media, but the entire structure of society is subject to change, as new network structures come into place. The technological infrastructures of communication networks are influencing the social structure of society; their development is closely related to the development of social structures in a process of interchange and mutual dependence. New technologies (as employed by mass and network media) are creating a new public sphere, a new realm of mediated democracy, and are thus challenging public intellectuals to gain techno-literacy and to make use of the new technologies for promoting progressive causes and social transformations.

It is in this context that our *Glocal Nomad* seminar invites you to discuss the social affordance of ICT and ‘other’ mass media in relation to issues of civic engagement, an advocacy approach to communication and the struggle for a democratic public sphere. The invited guest speakers, including both practitioners and academics, will address some of the far-reaching implications of the contemporary transformation of the media environment – not less pronounced in the Global South - for the way media development and e-participation strategies may practice and understand the encouragement of a multi-layered, democratic public sphere.

A number of presenters from Denmark and abroad will question how both strands of strategic communicative intervention may go hand in hand: What are the particular challenges, constraints and strengths of an ‘orthodox’ media development approach, on the one hand, and support for the emergence, proliferation and sustainability of civil society-centered approach to –e-advocacy and digital empowerment, on the other hand? How can

both approaches complement each other and what are the affordances of the specific media and communication technologies that they employ? Can we delineate a strategy of multi-faceted commitment that nurtures a media framework and set of communicative practices which contributes to the unifying goal of a democratic public sphere?

There will also be ample time in the afternoon session to discuss these pertinent questions with all participants.

Participation is free, but we kindly ask you to register. You can do so at <http://glocalnomad.net/>

Speakers:

Guest Professor **John Downing**, Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus;

Deputy Director **Tom Hughes**, International Media Support, Copenhagen;

Programme Coordinator **Jesper Strudsholm**, International Media Support, Copenhagen

Associate professor **Winnie Mitullah**, Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi;

Grace Githaiga, Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi;

Teke Ngomba, Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus;

Associate Professor **Poul Erik Nielsen**, Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus;

Associate Professor **Norbert Wildermuth**, CBIT, Roskilde University